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Gender inequalities during COVID-19

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Abstract

The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to progress toward gender equality and, instead, exacerbated existing gender inequalities across domains—from gendered divisions of labour to economic stability. In this paper we document some of the most glaring gender inequalities that have arisen in the COVID-19 pandemic and discuss how social psychological theories and research—including work on gender stereotypes and roles, responses to threat, precarious masculinity, perceptions of risk, and backlash—can help to explain the roots of these inequalities. In doing so, we use a broad definition of gender and consider relevant intersections of identity. Finally, we present three key considerations for research on gender inequalities moving forward. Namely, the need for social psychologists to (a) challenge binary conceptualizations of gender, (b) broaden the focus of research on gender inequalities, and (c) adopt an intersectional lens to address systemic inequalities in the wake of COVID-19.

Keywords

COVID-19, gender, gender equality, gender inequality

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The year 2020 was earmarked for reflection upon the progress made toward gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (United Nations, 2020). Ironically, the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light both new and existing gender inequalities. In this paper we (a) document some of the most glaring gender inequalities that have arisen; (b) discuss how social psychological research can help us make sense of inequalities; and (c) present three key considerations for research on gender inequalities moving forward. Wherever possible, our analysis uses an inclusive definition of gender and an intersectional lens that takes into account other identities (e.g., sexuality, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status).

Landscape of Gender Inequalities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

We first provide an overview of some of the most glaring gender inequalities emerging from research on the COVID-19 crisis. These inequalities exist across domains, including: (a) health and well-being, (b) the home, (c) relational violence,

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(d) work and poverty, and (e) leadership. We then discuss how social psychological research, on gender and more broadly, can help us make sense of these inequalities.

In Health and Well-Being

Although the severity and mortality rate of COVID-19 infection is twice as high for men as for women (Jin et al., 2020), the virus has taken a disproportionate toll on the everyday psychological and physical health of women. Compared to men, women reported greater stress and anxiety during the initial stages of the lockdown in Spain and Hungary (Ausín et al., 2020; Szabo et al., 2020), as well as greater psychological distress following Israel's initial lockdown (Horesh et al., 2020). Accordingly, the suicide rate among women in the UK is higher than it has been since 2004 (Warrington, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also put women's physical and reproductive health in jeopardy, as many countries such as Brazil, India, and Nepal reallocated their resources to the care of COVID-19 patients (United Nations, 2020). Such service closures are particularly concerning in countries where unsafe abortions are a leading cause of maternal death (Cousins, 2020). The negative effects are likely exacerbated for those from other marginalized groups such as queer and trans individuals, ethnic minority women, and women in poverty, as these groups are at heightened risk of healthcare marginalization (Hafi & Uvais, 2020; Taylor, 2019). Indeed, the disproportionate rates at which African American people in the US are contracting and dying from COVID-19 provide sobering evidence of the impact of systemic inequalities (Ray, 2020). If left unaddressed, these health inequalities stand to deepen as the pandemic continues.

In the Home

Household and childcare responsibilities increased for many during the pandemic, but gender inequalities were most apparent among those with children (Carlson et al., 2020). While mothers reported a greater increase in domestic and care work than fathers, they also reported a 5% decrease in work hours, while fathers' work hours largely remained stable (Collins et al., 2020). Moreover, mothers were more likely to be solely responsible for educating their children (Carlson et al., 2020). In addition to putting more time strain on women, these inequalities can have a negative impact on women's well-being and relationship satisfaction (Mikula et al., 2011; United Nations, 2020). Such domestic inequalities are particularly stark in countries with lower levels of gender equality and female empowerment (Fuwa, 2004; United Nations, 2020).

In Relational Violence

Relational violence tends to increase during large-scale disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). Women, and individuals from minoritized gender groups, are more likely to be the victims of such violence than cis-men (Azcona et al., 2020; James et al., 2016). In some countries, there has been an increase of calls to crisis lines, online searches related to intimate partner violence, and actual reports of abuse (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Usher et al., 2020). Other countries have seen a drop in reporting due to increased barriers for victims (Azcona et al., 2020). The pandemic has also given rise to new forms of control and manipulation. Abusers may fabricate or exploit quarantine "rules" to control their partners and prevent access to support. Moreover, out of fear of COVID-19, victims may feel less inclined to seek support or attend hospital (Usher et al., 2020). Women with disabilities, who are already at increased risk of relational and sexual violence, are in greater danger given the COVID-19 isolation measures (Azcona et al., 2020).

In Work and Poverty

Globally, compared to cis-men, women and members of minoritized gender groups tend to earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, and are more likely to be employed in informal sectors (United Nations, 2020). These conditions make them vulnerable to the economic impact of COVID-19. Historically, most economic recessions are seen as "he-cessions," followed by "she-recoveries"

where female-dominated industries form the backbone of the economic recovery (Alini, 2020). The opposite is true for COVID-19, which has been colloquially termed a "she-cession," as female-dominated service sector jobs were the first to disappear (Gupta, 2020), while male-dominated sectors such as construction have remained viable, and thus men's wallets have been less affected. Accordingly, women's poverty rate is expected to increase by almost 10% globally (Azcona et al., 2020). Moreover, those women who did not lose their jobs are often employed in the healthcare sector, working on the frontline of the pandemic (United Nations, 2020). Women of colour are especially likely to be employed in healthcare positions that put them in direct physical contact with patients (Azcona et al., 2020).

In Leadership

Despite these disproportionately undesirable outcomes for women and members of minoritized gender groups, there is one area where women appear to be faring well: national leadership. A study of COVID-19 leadership shows that countries with female leaders fared better in the early stages of the pandemic than countries with male leaders, even when countries are matched on gender equality, population size, urban agglomerations, and GDP (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2020; see also Antonakis, 2021, for further discussion of leadership during COVID-19). Specifically, female-led countries locked down more quickly than male-led countries and had nearly half as many deaths, despite having similar case rates. These findings provide initial evidence of the benefit and importance of female leadership and greater representation of women in government.

What Can Research Tell Us About Group Processes and Intergroup Relations During COVID-19?

Across domains, women and members of minoritized gender groups bear the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. But why do existing gender inequalities worsen during times of crisis? And why might new gender inequalities emerge? These are questions that social psychological research is well positioned to answer.

Why Do Gender Inequalities Worsen and Emerge During Crises?

Gender role beliefs and expectations. One explanation for why gender inequalities emerge and worsen during crises is long-standing gender role beliefs. Conventional feminine gender roles prescribe that women are highly communal, displaying traits such as warmth and concern for others, taking the role of caregiver within the home and lower status roles in society (Eagly & Wood, 1999). In contrast, conventional masculine gender roles prescribe that men are highly agentic, displaying traits such as stoicism and strength, and taking the role of provider outside the home and higher status roles in society.

While men's roles have remained aligned with expectations over time, women's roles have rapidly expanded beyond the home, with more women working outside the home than ever before (United Nations, 2020). Despite this, gendered expectations remain the same. Women are still expected to perform most of the domestic and care work. Consequently, with the closure of many professional childcare services during COVID-19, employed women are not only expected to be the primary caregivers within their families but to also remain productive at work.

Balancing these two expectations is challenging at the best of times, and near impossible during a global crisis (Power, 2020). Indeed, women, especially those in relationships with men, may be expected to reduce their work time to take over caregiving duties, whereas men, particularly those in relationships with women, are not. Thus, it is no surprise that women report greater stress and anxiety, as the pandemic has both increased the role strain and expectations put on women as well as reduced external support.

Gender roles, responses to threat, and precarious masculinity. Gender roles offer clear scripts for how people can and should behave. Consequently, defying gender role expectations can

elicit personal, identity, and systemic threat (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020). The reverse is also true. Experiencing threat can strengthen essentialist beliefs about gender, especially among men (Brescoll et al., 2013; Morton et al., 2009). Therefore, in times of crisis and change, people may justify gender inequalities by believing that women are inherently better suited to perform caring roles and domestic labour than men (Brescoll et al., 2013).

Importantly, gender roles not only prescribe certain behaviours, they are also proscriptive, including discouraging women from displaying coldness or stoicism, and men from displaying anxiety or distress. These gendered patterns have been apparent in the early stages of the pandemic: with women reporting greater anxiety, stress, and psychological distress, and men reporting more strength, calm, and determination (Hennekam & Shymko, 2020).

Theories of precarious masculinity (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) can help explain why men may feel unable to display feelings of anxiety or distress—because of fear of appearing too feminine and thereby losing their tenuous masculine status. Precarious masculinity may also help explain the increase in violence against women and members of gender minority groups, as COVID-19 has heightened known risk factors of family violence, including financial strain, environmental instability, alcohol consumption, isolation, and exposure to exploitative relationships (Usher et al., 2020). For instance, stay-at-home orders meant that more women and children were forced to remain in close proximity to their abusers, while also reducing access to external support. Moreover, theories of precarious masculinity (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) and masculine gender role stress (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987) suggest that job loss and financial instability could increase violence. Here, men who are concerned about failing to appear masculine, such as those who have recently lost their family provider role, have a greater tendency to engage in verbal and physical aggression toward their partners (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Consequently, men may have greater propensity to enact violence against female or minoritized gender partners to regain a sense of masculinity, control, or power in their relationships (Copenhaver et al., 2000).

Gender differences in risk-taking and backlash. Responses to COVID-19 at the national level can be explained, in part, by research on gender differences in leadership and risk perception. Gendered stereotypes suggest that risk-taking is integral to the masculine gender role, while at odds with the feminine gender role (Bem, 1974). Yet recent research suggests that women are not necessarily more risk-averse than men. Rather, there are gendered differences in the anticipated costs and benefits of taking certain risks, particularly stereotypically masculine risks (Morgenroth et al., 2018; Morgenroth et al., 2021).

During COVID-19, we have seen evidence of gender differences in leaders' appraisals of the costs and benefits of national lockdown. For instance, female leaders' initiation of national lockdowns at a lower number of fatalities may be due to their perceptions that the loss of human life may be more costly than the economic consequences. In contrast, male leaders, for whom financial risk and reward are key to their performance of masculinity, may have prioritized economic tolls over human life. Thus, while women may be more risk-averse when it comes to human life, men may be more risk-averse when it comes to economic impact (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2020).

Moreover, female leaders may be penalized more by a backlash from their constituents if they defy feminine empathy norms (Rudman, 1998). Indeed, because women are a minority in political leadership positions, their behaviour may be subject to greater public scrutiny than that of their male counterparts. Thus, if female leaders shirk gender expectations by risking human life, they may not only risk losing voter approval but may also be unduly vilified by media coverage (e.g., Hall & Donaghue, 2013). Thus, gendered expectations may affect leaders' decision-making and risk-taking, resulting in drastically different outcomes for citizens.

Think crisis–think female. Despite these inequalities, female leaders have fared remarkably well

during the early stages of the pandemic (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2020). Research on crisis leadership lends insight into why this may be. During times of crisis, stereotypically feminine qualities such as empathy and concern for others are coveted leadership qualities, known as the "think crisis–think female" association (Ryan et al., 2011). This association is a part of the glass-cliff phenomenon, where women are more likely to occupy positions of leadership in times of crisis (e.g., Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Thus, during times of global crisis, we may begin to see more women in leadership roles, although acknowledging the potential precarity of such positions is also important.

Emerging Issues, Research Questions, and Theoretical Challenges to Inform Future Research

As we see it, three key challenges for social psychologists have arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, social psychologists must endeavor to (a) challenge binary conceptualizations of gender and gender roles; (b) broaden the focus of research on gender inequalities; and (c) adopt an intersectional lens.

Challenging Binary Conceptualizations

Despite initial adherence to conventional gender roles, qualitative evidence suggests that over the course of the pandemic, some are becoming disillusioned with the confines of these roles (Hennekam & Shymko, 2020). Why? With the disruption of daily routines, work, economies, and the slowing down of life, it may be harder to ignore inequalities, especially within the home where many now spend most of their time. The time may be ripe for challenging binary conceptualizations of gender and gender roles, especially those responsible for maintaining gender inequalities in care work and domestic labour. Encouragingly, social psychologists are already leading the charge in reconceptualizing theories of gender beyond the binary (e.g., Hyde et al., 2019; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020), as well as developing more inclusive ways of measuring sex/gender (Bauer et al., 2017; Cameron & Stinson, 2019; Tate et al., 2013).

If one thing has been apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that conventional gender roles and divisions of labour are not only unsustainable but also harmful. Thus, greater flexibility in gender roles is to everyone's benefit. For instance, gay and lesbian couples, for whom gender roles are typically more flexible, tend to have more equitable divisions of domestic labour compared to heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2007). Thus, future research should investigate how to support individuals, couples, and societies to break free from their gendered roles, and investigate the role that context—specifically global crisis and prolonged uncertainty—plays in both buttressing and dismantling existing gender roles and inequalities.

Broadening the Focus of Research on Gender Inequalities

Work aimed at increasing gender equality tends to focus on women as the effect to be explained, and on what needs to be done to change or help women, a likely byproduct of androcentrism in both society and science (Bailey et al., 2020; Hegarty & Buechel, 2006). For example, many workplaces aim to increase women's participation and retention through policies and practices such as flexible working. While such approaches may begin to address gender inequalities at work, they do not address the other side of the coin—men's reduced participation in the domestic sphere (e.g., Meeussen et al., 2019). It is the domestic sphere that anchors inequality and prevents further progress toward gender equality. Thus, social psychologists must expand the focus of our research and intervention across gender groups, particularly toward understanding men's behaviour.

For example, the contextual, social, and systemic processes that thwart women's participation in the workforce, likely thwart men's participation in domestic and communal spheres. Restrictive gender stereotypes that equate

masculinity to being a good provider, encourage men to prioritize paid work over unpaid domestic responsibilities (Meeussen et al., 2019). Rarely do organizations challenge such stereotypic notions by instituting progressive policies such as mandatory paternal leave. Moreover, when men do engage in domestic work, they risk social backlash and ridicule, as such work is culturally devalued (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; see also Swift & Chasteen, 2021, for a discussion of age stereotypes during COVID-19).

Thus, alongside work aimed at increasing and improving women's participation in the workforce (e.g., Cheryan et al., 2017), social psychologists must also address the contextual factors that restrict men's participation in domestic work. For instance, future research should aim to combat negative stereotypes about men performing domestic tasks, build men's self-efficacy in domestic tasks, create environments that signal men's belonging in domestic spheres, and reward those men who engage in domestic work. Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) suggests that these efforts may help to broaden masculine stereotypes to include more communal traits in the same way that stereotypes of women have broadened over time to include agentic traits, alongside women's increased workforce participation (Eagly et al., 2020). Ultimately, social psychologists should endeavor to tailor these strategies to level inequalities across all gender groups.

Adopting an Intersectional Lens to Understand Inequalities

Finally, one of the most striking issues to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic is the lack of consideration of gender and its intersections as critical moderators of health and well-being. In the wake of the pandemic, institutions, funding bodies, and community stakeholders may have shifted their attention toward tackling the devastating virus and, in doing so, have seemed to forget the systemic viruses that already plague society and that, in many cases, have intensified. For example, less than 1 in 5 COVID-19 policies were gender-sensitive (Azcona et al., 2020). Moreover, only 37% of the COVID-19 cases reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) were disaggregated by sex/gender (Azcona et al., 2020), the majority of which reflected binary conceptualizations. Social psychological research is not immune to the erasure of nonbinary gender identities (Cameron & Stinson, 2019). There have been few, if any, empirical examinations of the experiences of individuals from minoritized gender and sexuality groups during COVID-19 published in mainstream social psychological journals. Social psychologists must do better. Binary conceptualizations of gender simply do not reflect the diversity of gender identities and lived experiences of the global population (GLAAD, 2017). Thus, our call to action for researchers moving forward is to integrate these considerations into mainstream theoretical and empirical work (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020).

Our call to action does not stop there. The COVID-19 virus is a biological illustration of existing social inequalities, as it disproportionately affects those already marginalized within societies (Azcona et al., 2020). Moving forward, researchers must do their part by employing an intersectional lens to understand the experiences of those at the margins. As Remedios and Snyder (2015) attest, progress towards a more inclusive and intersectional science can be incremental. For example, researchers studying gender and workplace discrimination may consider whether their hypotheses hold for people from different ethnic or racial backgrounds (see Marshburn et al., 2021, for a discussion of racial bias during COVID-19). New analytic tools continue to emerge to complement such theorizing. Bauer and Scheim (2019) have developed intercategorical quantitative methods that allow for the examination of the mediating processes through which different intersectional positions can lead to inequalities in outcomes. Going forward, such cutting-edge methods are invaluable for understanding the experiences of different groups, and how they can be supported during the pandemic and beyond. Without awareness and adequate scientific representation of marginalized groups, effective policies and interventions cannot be

made. Worse, they could put vulnerable populations in greater danger (e.g., women, trans, and nonbinary people in abusive relationships). It is for this reason that the general lack of consideration of gender and its intersections is unacceptable.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has held a magnifying glass to gender inequalities and, in doing so, has revealed cracks across many domains. In doing so, one thing is abundantly clear: the gender stereotypes, roles, and expectations underlying these inequalities are not sustainable and can cause undue harm, especially during times of crisis. Going forward, social psychologists must do their part by contributing to an understanding of what is needed to level the gendered playing field, while ensuring that they challenge binary conceptualizations of gender, broaden their focus across gendered groups, and adopt an intersectional lens in their research.

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